

ISSN: 0976-8165

# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed and Indexed eJournal

*9th Year of Open Access*

Vol. 9, Issue-VI December 2018

Editor-In-Chief- **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
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## **Elementary Teacher Education in Sikkim: Evaluation of In-house English Teaching/Learning Materials (Learning Resources)**

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**Article History:** Submitted-01/12/2018, Revised-28/12/2018, Accepted-31/12/2018, Published-10/01/2019.

### **Abstract:**

Evaluation is widely acknowledged as a powerful means of improving the quality of education (AbdelWahab 55). There are many methods of evaluation that can be used for evaluating English Language Teaching (ELT) teaching/learning materials. An evaluative checklist is one of the methods that can be used to help select the suitability and appropriacy of materials for learners (AbdelWahab 55). This paper presents an overall view of evaluating in-house materials using a checklist adapted using the adapted version of Cunningsworth's checklist for evaluation and selection of coursebook and an extra section on social and cultural contexts added for better evaluation. The findings are expected to be useful for English language teachers, ELT material developers and evaluators as well as curriculum developers. Further study is required to improve the instrument. However, the aim is to assist the English teacher-educators in developing materials which will be most appropriate to their student-teachers.

**Keywords:** Evaluation, teaching/learning materials, evaluation checklists, socio-cultural context.

### **Background**

English component of the D.El.Ed Programme in Sikkim has four courses such as:

- Proficiency of English Language
- Pedagogy in English
- Elective English
- Pedagogy of Languages

Here the courses Elective English and Pedagogy of Languages are optional courses thus not available or taught at all the institutes. Learning materials here refers to specially designed/authentic/teacher written/teacher prepared or teacher produced (in house)/learner

generated materials which are usually given to the student-teachers in the form of notes or photocopies. For the purpose of evaluating the learning materials the researcher evaluates the dictated notes and photocopies of the two main courses i.e. Proficiency of English Language and Pedagogy in English.

## **Rationale and Aims**

The teaching/learning materials at the D.El.Ed programme in Sikkim are basically in-house materials or teacher-prepared materials. In this case teacher refers to teacher-educators. This paper assumes that the materials given to the student-teachers are not good and the student-teachers fail to comprehend them very often. Student-teachers most rely on the teacher made materials as no such materials are available and if it is available at all then it is not suitable. The teacher training institutes have no such policy on the in-house materials and lack a prescribed textbook which is detrimental. Richards states any learning program may have no impact if it does not have textbooks as they provide structure and a syllabus. Thus, this section focuses on the evaluation of teaching materials and its suitability to the teaching learning situation at teacher training institutes in Sikkim.

The following are the objectives of this study:

- To evaluate the materials in question from different aspects and find the appropriacy of the materials to the student-teachers needs.
- To facilitate the teacher-educators in improving the materials and to help them select materials which will be helpful for the student-teachers' learning.
- To use the findings in designing textbooks for the student-teachers by the institutes.
- To identify strengths and weaknesses of the materials already in use.
- To find out if the materials meet the needs of the student-teachers and facilitates learning process.
- To establish the degree of importance of each section and sub-category of the checklist?
- To prepare a list of items that can be included in the checklist for further study?
- To analyse how far the materials meet the immediate language learning needs of your learners.

### **Statement of the problem**

It is true that there has been any study on evaluating English materials at the elementary teacher education level in Sikkim. This is perhaps one of the first such studies aimed at checking the appropriacy of the teacher education materials in Sikkim. Thus, we may say that this study in some way will be inadequate but an attempt has been made to develop a checklist so serve such purposes in the state.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings**

Some key aspects on which the present research is grounded are discussed below:

#### **Evaluation**

Evaluation is defined in many ways based on the subject matter and purpose of evaluation. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the most basic definition of evaluation is “the act of considering something to decide how useful or valuable it is”. McGrath’s basic explanation of textbook evaluation concerns the discovery of whether what you were looking for was there. When found, you then need to put a value on your findings. Evaluation implies judgment-making which therefore also means that evaluation is subjective.

#### **Defining Terms**

- **Materials** will be considered anything which is used to help language learning (Tomlinson). Examples include but are not limited to: coursebooks, workbooks, CDs, flashcards, and CD-ROMs.
- **Materials evaluation** will be considered a procedure that involves examining learning materials to establish their value (Tomlinson).
- **Adaptation** is the altering of materials to improve or make them more suitable for a particular type of learner or group of learners.

### **Defining Materials Evaluation**

The reasons for materials evaluation activities are also many and varied. One of the major reasons is the need to adopt new course books or new materials or improve on the existing materials or so to say adapting it. Another reason as Cunningsworth emphasized is to identify particular strengths and weaknesses in textbooks already in use. Tomlinson also states that the process of materials evaluation can be seen as a way of developing our understanding of the ways in which it works and, in doing so, of contributing to both acquisition theory and pedagogic practices.

Materials evaluation has been defined by Tomlinson as ‘a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials’. An evaluation focuses largely on the needs of the users of the materials and makes subjective judgements about their effects (Tomlinson). An evaluation might include questions such as ‘Do the reading texts sufficiently engage learners?’ which elicit responses containing a necessarily subjective value judgement. Evaluations can be carried out pre-use, in-use or post-use. The main aim of evaluating materials pre-use, according to Rubdy is to measure the potential of what teachers and learners can do with them in the classroom. In-use and post-use evaluations are important in establishing how successful learning materials are (McDonough & Shaw).

Tomlinson has an opinion as to, how materials should be evaluated? He says:

Materials are often evaluated in an ad hoc, impressionistic way, which tends to favour materials which have face validity (i.e., which conform to people’s expectations of what materials should look like) and which are visually appealing. In order to ensure that materials are devised, revised, selected and adapted in reliable and valid ways, we need to ensure that materials established procedures which are thorough, rigorous, systematic and principled (5).

### **Materials Evaluation and Design**

The impact and effect of teaching material evaluation along with design have been recognized in the academic community at large. In the words of McGrath :

Those with a responsibility for the development and administration of language-learning programmes in either educational or workplace settings will need little persuading that materials evaluation and design, along with, for example, syllabus design, learner assessment and the study of classroom processes, are centrally important applied – linguistics activities (1).

Littlejohn and Hutchinson (cited in McGrath) say that there has been great related indicators there has been increasing inclusion of materials evaluation and design as a field of study within Master's programmes and the trickle of students pursuing doctoral research.

### **Teaching Materials and Teacher Education**

It has always been seen that in case of teacher education usually student-teachers are asked to make their materials as appropriate materials are at lack all the time. There is also the possibility that the teacher-educators are not able to adapt to the change taking place and unable to cope with it and thus resort to encouraging student-teachers to develop their own learning materials. To this opinion McGrath says, “Thus, there is value in trainees learning to analyze learners’ needs and set appropriate objectives and then going on to plan lessons and develop materials to meet those needs if suitable materials are not available.”

### **Methods for Evaluating Textbooks**

There are basically three methods of evaluating any materials in question. The first is called the impressionistic method and it involves analyzing materials on the basis of a general impression. The general impression would be gained by reading the blurb and the contents page and then skimming through the materials to get a sense of organization, topics, layout and visuals. This method is not adequate in itself but could be combined with for example the second method, which is called the checklist method. This method is systematic in the way that the criteria on the list are checked off in a certain order. The criteria may be in the form of items to be checked or questions to be answered. The third method, the in-depth method, suggests a careful examination of representative features such as the design of one particular unit or exercise, or the treatment of particular language elements. An obvious disadvantage in this method is that the selected section might not be representative of the book as a whole. For the current study, a combination of all the

three methods is used and a checklist is prepared in the form of questions to be answered by the researcher on the basis of observation.

### **Research Tool**

There are many ways of evaluating materials which are available but Tomlinson (2003) once again says:

My experience, both personally and of students and teachers, is that it is extremely useful to develop a set of criteria for use on a particular evaluation and then to use that set as a basis for developing subsequent context-specific sets. Initially this is demanding and time-consuming, but it not only helps the evaluators to clarify their principles of language learning and teaching but it also ensures that future evaluations (both formal and informal) are systematic, rigorous and able all, principles (27).

Based on the various review of literature and needs an observation checklist was prepared and adapted using a checklist version of Cunningsworth's. The items of the evaluative checklist were grouped under the following domains with a few questions in each domain (refer *Appendix A* for the checklist):

- **Aims and Approaches**
- **Design and Organization**
- **Social and Cultural context**
- **Language Content**
- **Skills**
- **Topic**
- **Methodology**
- **Practical Considerations**

### **Results of Evaluation: A Summary**

- The aims do not correspond with aims of the curriculum and the needs of the learners.
- The syllabus is comprehensive but the materials on the syllabus is not comprehensive as the materials in questions are not aimed at improving the proficiency but rather dictating theoretical background of the contents.

- The content is well organised and sequenced well in the syllabi document but executed poorly.
- The materials are not at all suitable for the individual study as they are mere reproduction of mass notes and there is no scope of any kind of revision.
- The topics in the content are no way closer to the student-teachers social and cultural culture.
- The materials which is in the form of photocopy does not help student-teachers achieve proficiency but rather gives them theoretical knowledge on the content.
- The materials do not follow any approach as such as the teacher-educators either dictate notes and distribute photocopy of notes.

### **Significance of the Study**

First, this study being a part of a bigger study aims to develop English learning materials observation checklist. The results of which will be used to triangulate with results of questionnaire and interviews for curriculum evaluation. The use of this checklist may have greater significance since it can reveal the strengths and weaknesses in the selected materials, and determine whether or not the materials are justified, or needs supplementation and/or modification or adaptation. It is also hoped that the study results would help in making some appropriate recommendations for the curriculum planners, teacher-educators and experts at the elementary teacher educational institutes for further adapting the quality of the English language materials in general. This study may also provide guidance for any retrospective textbook or coursebook designers and evaluation in future.

### **Recommendations/Suggestions**

On the basis of the above study the researcher puts forward the following recommendations. It is hoped that the process of designing or selecting or adapting or even designing a coursebook could be improved by following these recommendations:

- Materials should be revised from time to time to make sure they are suitable at all times.
- An appropriate plan should be organized in which the roles of teacher-educators, student-teachers, and Curriculum planners are stated clearly.

- In revising the materials, good qualities of the materials should be retained and the shortcomings should be eliminated or at least reduced.
- Student-teachers suggestions should be considered and they should be allowed to participate in making any modifications or improvements or adaptations concerning the existing materials.
- Finally, materials development is by now an area of specialization. It is always recommended that elementary teacher education institutes have a special coursebooks for each of their English courses with regular evaluation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The evaluative criteria used in this study were only some of the numerous possible sets of criteria against which an English Language materials may be evaluated. Thus, there is always a possibility of improvement and making it a more comprehensive and detailed study.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of this study it would be right to say that the quality of the curriculum reform or improvement basically depends on a good process of evaluation. Moreover, in case of learning materials can be expanded to include more aspects only through proper evaluation. Thus, evaluation in general is absolutely necessary for any curriculum in action. The nature of the instrument limits the possibility of a more in-depth analysis or evaluation of the materials. Despite its limitations, however, this study makes contributions to adaptations of the existing materials. Therefore, it is important that all individuals involved at all levels, from policy makers to administrators, material developers or designers, curriculum developers, teacher-educators and student-teachers, consider the importance of their decisions and make wise judgment at right time, and strive to effectively match, adapt or develop materials with the identified needs of the learners.

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## Appendix A

### Checklist for Materials Evaluation

The checklist serves an aid to evaluate the teaching-learning materials used in the English classrooms of the D.El.Ed programme in Sikkim. This checklist will be used to evaluate materials of courses and it has been designed to be comprehensive and not exhaustive.

Kind of Material: *Specifically designed/authentic/teacher-written or teacher-prepared or teacher-produced (in-house)/learner-generated*

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The checklist is divided into eight sections. Each section may carry a few questions. Please answer the questions below to the point.

- **Aims and Approaches**

1. Do the aims of the materials correspond closely with the aims of the teachers' education programme and with the needs of the learners?
2. How comprehensive are the materials? Does it cover most or all of what is needed? Is it a good resource for the student-teachers?

- **Design and Organization**

3. How is the content in the materials organized and sequenced?
4. Is the grading and progression suitable for the student-teachers?
5. Is there adequate revision of the content in the materials and suitable of individual study?

- **Social and Cultural context**

6. Do the topics of the content related to the students' social and cultural context and meet the needs of the targeted cultural group?

- **Language Content**

7. Does the materials cover teaching and learning grammar items appropriate to level taking student-teachers' needs into account?
8. Does the materials include material for pronunciation work? If so, what is covered: individual sounds, word stress, sentence stress, intonation?

- **Skills**

9. Are the four skills adequately covered, bearing in mind the course aims and syllabus requirement?
10. Is there material for integrated skills work?

- **Topic**

11. Is there sufficient material of genuine interest to the student-teachers?
12. Will the topics help expand student-teachers' awareness and enrich their experience?

- **Methodology**

13. What approach/approaches to language learning are taken by the materials? Is this or are they appropriate to the learning/teaching situation?
14. Does the material include any advice/ help to trainees on study skills and learning strategies?

- **Practical Considerations**

15. Are the materials easy to obtain?
16. Does any part of the materials require equipments such as language laboratory, listening center, or video player? If so, do you have the equipment available for use and is reliable?